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ABSTRACT

Noting that employers are increasingly demanding that educators modify their teaching methods to reflect trends in the skills necessary for entry-level positions, this paper briefly describes teaching strategies that involve active learning and then explains the benefits students gain by joining the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA). The paper discusses the strategies of cooperative learning, formative evaluation, the focus group strategy, and critical thinking. The paper also: discusses the history of PRSSA; provides the PRSSA mission statement; outlines benefits of membership; presents the structure of the PRSSA; elaborates the structure of the PRSSA chapter; describes the roles of the PRSSA chapter president, executive board members, the secretary, the treasurer, and the public relations director, the PRSSA national committee, and the district director; and discusses what students learn from being a PRSSA member. The paper concludes that membership in preprofessional organizations greatly aid the student in learning and using the information taught in the classroom in a practical and professional atmosphere. Contains 10 references. (RS)

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Public Relations In Action: A View of the Benefits of Student Membership in Pre-Professional Organizations

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Public Relations In Action: A View of the Benefits of Student Membership in Pre-Professional Organizations

"I Think, Therefore I Am"

"We Learn by Doing"

"Reach for the Stars"

"Be the Best You Can Be"

Learning comes in all shapes, sizes, colors, angles and forms. We, as humans, think, do, reach, and compete. As teachers, we ask our students to think, analyze, perform, and evaluate. We teach our students by lecturing, providing examples, distributing handouts, testing, writing, showing videos, and requiring a performance demonstration of their knowledge of the subject.

Education, on the other hand, is currently facing a period of rapid change. One of the longest-lasting changes to take place has been the increased demands by employers for educators to restructure their teaching methods. There is an awareness by employers that the skills necessary for an entry level position are changing and that education needs to reflect these trends. Today, employers want entry level people who have experience, critical thinking and strategic planning skills as well as technical skills in the related field. A teaching strategy employed to develop and create the skills employers are seeking is called **Cooperative Learning**. This method of instruction allows students to structure their own environment and work together to solve problems. Cooperative learning is defined as "an instructional technique which requires students to work together in small fixed groups on a structured learning task (Cooper, et al., 1990, p.1)." While the learning task can take on a variety of forms, students involved in any exercise in cooperative learning interrelate with one another as they develop common goals, identify and perform tasks, and assign rewards. Decision-making activities, such as these, build a student's confidence to apply fundamental concepts required to resolve professional problems (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1990). The critical thinking and

strategic planning skills are developed and used to identify problems, goals, objectives, and a course of action.

A second teaching strategy employed in skill development is referred to as **Formative Evaluation** (Carr, 1991). This technique recognizes that the use of frequent and regular feedback to students facilitates mastery of learning and skill development (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Cross, 1987). It is important that students learn how to critically evaluate their progress if they are to be self-directed learners (Schon, 1987). Employers often want self-directed and independent workers, simply because they do not have the time to oversee the entry level person. Formative evaluation encourages the development of self-evaluation and direction.

A third teaching strategy used is the **Focus Group** strategy. A focus group is a data gathering technique used to investigate people's attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors in an in-depth fashion. While many group interactions occur to problem solve, reach consensus, and provide recommendations, the primary purpose of focus groups is to collect data in a systematic manner (Krueger, 1994). Focus groups have been employed extensively in product development, public relations campaigns, survey construction, and marketing research. Exposure to focus groups allow students to become familiar with a technique they are likely to encounter as an employee and as a consumer, learn how a focus group operates, and gather current psychographic data.

A final teaching strategy that helps to teach and refine skills of the students is **Critical Thinking**. This concept views intellectual development as a scheme. For example, students pass through a progression of intellectual development from simplistic dualism, through a consideration of diverse or multiple knowledge domains, to a resolution of these conflicts in the form of a personal commitment to some one position. In their learning process, students begin by depending on some authority figure to provide them with the right answers (dualism). As they learn more, these students begin to realize that there is more than one valid perspective to an issue (multiplicity). To deal with these multiple perspectives, students then develop and commit to their own perspective (relativism and commitment). This process is best accomplished when instruction is deliberately designed to confront students with these phases of development.

Each of these teaching strategies discussed involve active learning. A 1988 study was conducted to survey educators and employers on the status of vocation-specific education. Results indicated that 39% of the graduates surveyed felt that they were

unprepared for the realities of working in an organization when they obtained their first jobs. 25% reported that they did not possess the people skills needed in their initial jobs. People skills and an awareness of organizational realism became more critical five years after graduation. More than half of the respondents reported deficiency in people skills, and two-thirds reported deficiency in organizational realism. Employers apparently do have legitimate concerns.

Overall, each of these strategies suggest that students learn more when they are active participants in rather than passive recipients of learning. One method of teaching students these skills employers want and expect and utilizing each of the instructional strategies discussed is to encourage membership and participation in a pre-professional organization. This paper will examine one such organization, the Public Relations Student Society of America, and explain the benefits students gain as a result of membership.

History of PRSA

Public relations students and educational institutions with public relations programs are encouraged to join a national pre-professional organization called the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA). The parent organization, Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), is a national organization dedicated to the educational and professional advancement of the field of public relations and public relations practitioners. PRSSA was founded in 1968 by PRSA, declaring formally that its purpose is to cultivate a favorable and mutually advantageous relationship between students and professional public relations practitioners. The organization further aims to foster the students' understanding of current theories and procedures, encouraging them to adhere to the highest ideals and principles of the practice of public relations, and instill in them a professional attitude.

PRSSA chapters around the country are chartered by the PRSA Board of Directors. The PRSSA National Assembly is the primary governing body of the student society; the PRSSA National Committee is responsible for managing the business and affairs of the student society. Both operate within the powers granted them by the PRSSA National Bylaws. Student officers and District Directors are elected at the annual PRSSA Assembly; advisors are appointed by the PRSA Board of Directors each year.

PRSSA Mission Statement

The mission of the Public Relations Student Society of America is twofold: (1) to serve its members by enhancing their knowledge of public relations and providing access to professional development opportunities; and (2) to serve the public relations profession by helping to develop highly qualified, well-prepared professionals.

Benefits of Membership

Student members of PRSSA are presented with a myriad of opportunities for networking with professional practitioners, gaining practical experience in the public relations field, developing valuable portfolio materials, and competing for regional and national awards and scholarships. Some the benefits at the national and regional levels are:

* Attendance at regional and national conferences and caucuses

* Access to a Professional Connection jobline hotline

* Availability of professional internships

* Applying for competition for the prestigious Gold Key Award which is given to students who have demonstrated scholastically and professional excellence in public relations

* Competing in a national case study competition called the Bateman PRSSA Case Study Competition

* Applying for the Schiano Scholarship

* Competing for a M.A. Thesis Award

* Competing for the L.L.L. Golden Writing Award

* Development of leadership skills at all levels

* Entering the annual PRSSA Chapter Awards Competition

* Interacting with professional and other students across the nation

* Writing for a newsletter

Each of these opportunities allow the student to learn and/or refine valuable skills such as analyzing, formatting, strategic thinking, organizing, leading, writing, and creating. When these skills are used by the student in a situation that is interesting or challenging to that individual, then the skill and information is refined and retained. The teaching strategies employed here are cooperative learning and critical thinking.

An article published in one of the national PRSSA newsletters is entitled "Society offers members a chance to showcase talents at every level." The article goes on to say how the talents of the members can be used and refined.

Structure of PRSSA

The leadership of PRSSA is structured as follows:

National Committee
- Chairperson
- Vice Chairperson
- Editor-in-Chief
- Public Relations Director
- Immediate Past Chairperson
- Faculty Advisors
- Professional Advisors
- PRSA Board Liaison
- District Directors

District Committee
- District Directors (1 for each of the 12 regions in the country)

Chapter Committee
- President
- Vice-President
- Secretary
- Treasurer
- Public Relations Director

Structure of the PRSSA Chapter

Each Executive Board of a PRSSA chapter is comprised of a President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer, and Public Relations Director. If the chapter membership is large enough, other Vice-President positions with varying duties may be created. For example, a chapter may have a Vice-President of Programming, Vice-President of Communication, and/or Vice-President of Special Events. The chapter may also have a Historian who records all chapter activities so that a history of the chapter is created. In addition to the student members of the chapter, one Faculty Advisor and two Professional Advisors are needed.

The Faculty Advisor must be a PRSA member and teach in a public relations program. The public relations program must offer five courses: Principles of Public Relations, Public Relations Campaigns, Public Relations Writing, Public Relations Internship, and Public Relations Research. The primary responsibility of the faculty advisor is setting the tone of professionalism for the chapter, its officers and members. The motivation of students is another key function of the faculty advisor, the principal one being the persuasion of students to elect dedicated, talented officers who will be active and resourceful leaders.

The Professional advisors must be PRSA members. One advisor must hold an accredited status with PRSA. The accredited status is referred to as an APR (Accredited Public Relations). The APR is achieved by practicing in the field for 5 years or more and taking a 6-7 hour written and oral examination. The duties of a Professional Advisor are very distinct. These advisors are usually the most visible role-models of the public relations professional with whom the students have contact. They must demonstrate that the practice of public relations is an ethical profession. They must show that the professional practitioner is genuinely interested in and concerned about events that affect the community, the nation, and the world.

PRSSA is student run and organized (e.g., cooperative/active learning). The students demonstrate leadership and organization skills. They are presented with challenging situations, to which they must find a solution (e.g., decision-making, critical thinking, cooperative learning, and formative evaluation skills). The solution is created by research, analysis, implementation, and evaluation. An article in **SWAP**, a national executive newsletter for the exchange of ideas, states that chapter development begins with defining organizational objectives. The article says campaign and chapter

development "...calls for thorough research, point-by-point planning, execution of ideas and a reoccurring evaluation..." (e.g., cooperative learning, formative evaluation, focus groups, and critical thinking).

Another article in **SWAP** headlines "Meeting structure vital to chapter goals and maintaining smooth flow." I believe this article offers evidence that the student members definitely recognize the advantages a pre-professional organization offers to them and how to shape those advantages into valuable learning tools (e.g., formative evaluation skills).

Role of the PRSSA Chapter President

The basic duties of a PRSSA Chapter President are numerous and listed below:

* Preside at all membership and executive board meetings

* Appoint all committees; advise committee chairpersons; advise all members with chapter activities

* Delegate responsibilities of officers and committees

* Direct overall operations of chapter

* Recommend and establish goals and objectives for the chapter with the approval of the membership and faculty and professional advisors

* Coordinate the functions of officers and committees; recommend and direct the execution of policies and procedures, together with the specific programs in the interests of the chapter and with the approval of the membership and advisors

* Assist the treasurer in collecting annual dues and assume responsibility for providing accurate information on the accompanying dues form to be forwarded to PRSSA National Headquarters on November 1 and again on March 1

* Foster a strong relationship between the local PRSSA chapter and the local PRSA chapter.

* Develop a strong relationship with the local public relations community

* Direct all activities of the Executive Council

* Maintain consistent contact with the Faculty Advisor and Professional Advisors

Roles of Executive Board Members

The **Vice-President** of the chapter is required to:

* Perform all duties of the chapter president if the president is absent or unable to perform his/her duties

* Assist the president in coordinating and directing committee activities and chapter operations and perform such duties as may be delegated by the president

* Recommends to the president goals, objectives, plans and programs for the benefit of the chapter

* Advise the president on matters of policy and procedure

* Coordinate and disseminate information about PRSA Associate Membership for graduating PRSSA members

The **Secretary's** responsibilities include:

* Prepare agendas with the help of the president, record minutes of all executive board and general membership meetings and handle the appropriate distribution of these minutes;

* Maintain a record of chapter members, including the permanent home address and in-school address of each

* Handle all chapter correspondence

The **Treasurer's** duties include:

* Preparing the annual budget

* Provide financial reports periodically to the chapter membership

* Collect chapter and national dues at the times specified in the PRSSA National and Chapter Bylaws

* Collect fees for any chapter special events and fundraisers

* Disburse chapter funds with proper approval

* Provide safekeeping for all chapter funds and keep accurate financial records

The duties for the **Public Relations Director** are:

* Produce the chapter newsletter on a regular basis throughout the school year

* Post announcements for chapter meetings throughout the campus

* Direct orders for posters, PRSSA stationery, and other printed materials

* Coordinate press releases, feature articles, advertising and brochures relating to the chapter

* Handle all campus and area press issues

* Help promote new membership with brochures, fliers and other appropriate visual aids

* Coordinate photography for the chapter and the chapter's scrapbook

The list of duties per office are common to professional organizations. The skills, activities, rules, structure, and challenges are the same.

The situation changes between the student-run and professional organization, but the considerations and procedures do not. Students learn how to effectively operate in a structured organizational setting before entering the workforce.

PRSSA National Committee

Twenty-one people comprise the National Committee. Each plays an important role in guiding the society in its growth and development. This committee is responsible for managing the business and affairs of PRSSA. The members are always available to assist individual chapters and members with special projects and/or problems. The National Committee operates within the powers granted by PRSA and PRSSA Bylaws to promote the growth of education in public relations.

The National Committee is comprised of four executive officers- National Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson, Immediate Past Chairperson, and National Public Relations Director- 12 District Directors, two Faculty Advisors, two Professional Advisors, a PRSA Board Liaison (PRSA representative), and the PRSSA Executive Director (professional staff administrator). All student members of the National Committee are eligible for re-election, as long as they remain in school at the undergraduate or graduate level, continue to meet the requirements of their offices and meet PRSSA Bylaw requirements.

These 16 National Committee members are the students who organize and lead the 108 plus chapters in the United States! These members organize the Annual National Conference that usually hosts 530 plus students nationwide.

The Conference offers students the opportunity to attend workshops on topics such as chapter development, community service, fundraising, programming, newsletters, political public relations, creative persuasion, health care, sports and entertainment public relations and the impact of organizational change on government. These topics and others offer students the opportunity to learn about specialties that are not usually addressed in great detail in a degree program. At this conference that PRSSA leaders and members receive national awards and recognition. They are rewarded in the midst of their peers (e.g., cooperative learning)! At this conference that members network with PRSA members for information, position openings, and internships. At this conference that the information the students learned in the classroom begins to take shape and make sense (e.g., critical thinking).

PRSSA and the conference activities attempt to prepare members to enter the public relations field as the most highly qualified, best networked and most professionally developed public relations students in the market.

The Role of the District Director

The District Director is responsible for assisting chapters in developing strong local programs by contributing to the individual professional development of members; providing direction for continued chapter growth; coordinating district activities to promote interchapter relations; encouraging interaction between PRSSA chapters and their sponsoring PRSA chapters; providing information concerning national policies, procedures, and activities; and representing the interests and concerns of district members to the National Committee of PRSSA.

The District Director can provide chapters with assistance in developing chapter activities that will increase the growth and professionalism of its members. Since the Director communicates with every chapter in the district, as well as having access as a member of the National Committee to information concerning activities of chapters outside of the district, s/he can provide specifics on implementing such activities as student firms, alumni programs, fundraisers, and professional partners programs (e.g., cooperative learning and focus groups).

To aid in district growth, the District Director promotes the interchange of ideas throughout the district (e.g., cooperative learning). The Director publishes a newsletter, **Exchange**, which serves as the primary vehicle for facilitating this interchange.

In a liaison capacity, the Director strives to create a cohesiveness within the district by coordinating district activities such as regional/district conferences, caucuses, and workshops.

The District Director utilizes every public relations theory, technique and strategy available to communicate and lead 5-12 schools in the district. The organization of hundreds of students in a district requires leadership, dedication, knowledge, and foresight (e.g., cooperative learning, focus groups, formative evaluation, and critical thinking). These are skills we can recite in a classroom, but are more useful when used in a realistic setting.

What Do Students Learn from Being a PRSSA Member?

As a PRSSA faculty advisor at different universities, I continually ask myself that question to remind myself I know that PRSSA is upholding its mission statement. As I answer that question for the 1994-1995 academic year, I peruse the chapter, regional, and national newsletters. My attention is called to headlines such as:

"National Conference Broadens Perspectives of PR Students"

" Agricultural Public Relations"

"Diagnosing the Trends in Health Care"

" Global Issues Can Be Understood By Learning "Locals" Way of Life"

"Practitioners will rely on change management"

"Doing the right thing is the best PR"

"Sports PR the Magic Way"

" Industry choice affects PR salaries"

"Promoting Today's Technology"

"A whole new world: Internationalism"

" Public Relations Ethics Questioned"

My answer to the above question is, "Quite a bit!"

Conclusion

The 1994-1995 National PRSSA President summed up the crux of this paper very well. He said:

> "As technology marches forward and as the Information Age progresses, students preparing to become professionals are expected to be highly skilled

and well-versed in many areas. Most employers do not have the luxury of training graduates for a new position. Instead, employers seek experienced individuals who are "fuel injected" with a high level of public relations knowledge and skills and who are ready to hit the ground running... That's what PRSSA is all about."

Preprofessional organizations greatly aid the student in learning and utilizing the information taught in the classroom in a practical and professional atmosphere. The work of a pre-professional organization uses and emphasizes the techniques of cooperative learning, formative evaluation, focus group research, and critical thinking skills. These organizations create, shape and mold professionals. They also make our job as educators a bit easier and much more rewarding.

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PRSSA Chapter Handout

1994 PRSSA PRSSA National Conference Program